

**Unheard Voices of Iran**  
Five Folk-inspired Compositions

By

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: IRADJ SAHBAI .....</b>	<b>6</b>
LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES .....	6
EXPLORING THE PIECE: <i>CHANTS POPULAIRES POUR VIOLIN ET HARPE</i> .....	8
<b>CHAPTER 2: REZA VALI .....</b>	<b>13</b>
LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES .....	13
EXPLORING THE PIECE: <i>LOVE DRUNK</i> PERSIAN FOLK SONGS SET. 16B FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO .....	16
<b>CHAPTER 3: SHAHAB PARANJ.....</b>	<b>28</b>
LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES .....	28
EXPLORING THE PIECE: <i>AVAZ-E JAN</i> FOR SOLO VIOLIN .....	29
<b>CHAPTER 4: MOHAMMAD REZA DARVISHI .....</b>	<b>38</b>
LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES .....	38
EXPLORING THE PIECE: <i>REINCARNATION</i> FOR STRING QUARTET .....	40
<b>CHAPTER 5: SAHBA AMINIKIA.....</b>	<b>44</b>
LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES .....	44
EXPLORING THE PIECE: <i>I WILL GREET THE SUN AGAIN</i> FOR STRING QUARTET WITH NARRATION .....	46
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>55</b>

## INTRODUCTION

“The story goes that a Persian poet was discussing music with some Westerners who compared their music to an ocean, and Persian music to a miserable drop. ‘Indeed,’ answered the poet, ‘but that ocean is only water, while this drop is a tear.’”<sup>1</sup>

An important crossroad for migration and trade in Central Asia, as well as a bridge between the Middle East and the Far East, Iran is a country with a rich variety of ethnic groups including Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, Lors, and Arabs. As one of the oldest and most influential cultural traditions in the Middle East, Iranian folk music has remained largely unexplored by Western audiences. This project showcases five folk-inspired compositions by selected Iranian composers. Three pieces were written for this project, and two are pre-existing compositions. All five were performed at my lecture recital on March 31, 2021, and are included in the recording project. They are:

1. Iradj Sahbai: *Chants populaires pour violon et harpe* (2021)
2. Reza Vali: *Love Drunk* folk songs set No.16B for violin and piano (2014)
3. Shahab Paranj: *Avaz-e Jan* for solo violin (2021)
4. Mohammadreza Darvishi: *Reincarnation* for string quartet (2014)
5. Sahba Aminikia: *I Will Greet the Sun Again* for string quartet, based on a poem by Forough Farrokhzad (2021)

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<sup>1</sup> Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "Iran." In *The Other Classical Musics: Fifteen Great Traditions*, edited by Church Michael, 320-39. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, Ny, USA: Boydell & Brewer, 2015. Accessed July 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt155j3zb.20>. pp.321.

These selections stemmed from my experience planning a recent solo recital. In my search for a solo violin piece by an Iranian composer, I found *Calligraphy No.5* by Reza Vali. This piece is directly influenced by Iranian traditional music and is composed in *dastgah Nāvā*, one of the oldest harmonic modes that is still being used in traditional Iranian music. In the process of learning and performing this piece, I found a meaningful message to deliver that I have never come across before as a performer. Since then, I decided to dedicate my final project to compositions that represent Persian identity. I contacted Vali, and he generously offered his pieces that feature the violin. Among them, I found *Love Drunk*, a set of four Persian folk songs for violin and piano, to be the best fit for this project. Although the piece has been recorded in versions for both violin and cello, no analysis of the folk songs has yet been done.

My first encounter with Mohammadreza Darvishi was at his house in Tehran in 2015, where my Iranian quartet had a recording session. I had heard about him long before that meeting and knew that his music was held in the highest regard in Iran. He is one of the most knowledgeable people I know. His compositions are highly influenced by his extensive research on the regional music of Iran. His string quartet, *Reincarnation*, is a great example of his hybrid use of Iranian regional music. He shared the sheet music with me, allowing me the honor to give the U.S. premiere of this piece at my lecture recital.

I met Iradj Sahbai while attending the Tehran Symphony Orchestra concerts in Iran. He is a regular guest conductor of the orchestra as well as a well-known composer. His compositions display a deep connection to the music of his heritage. His folk songs for solo piano motivated me to ask him for a similar composition for violin. He generously offered to write a set of seven folk songs for violin and harp, which I was able to premier at my lecture recital.

Vali, Darvishi, and Sahbai were born during the pre-revolutionary era in Iran. Darvishi has lived his entire life in Iran, while Vali and Sahbai have resided abroad for most of their lives.

Among a younger generation of composers, Sahba Aminikia and Shahab Paranj seemed most promising for this project, given that their compositions are deeply influenced by Iranian music. Both were born in Iran in a post-revolutionary era and are currently residing in California.

I became familiar with Sahba Aminikia through hearing his works performed by remarkable ensembles and musicians—such as Kronos Quartet—on social media. My first impression of him after our first conversation over Zoom was that he is a versatile artist who looks to create meaningful collaborations. I feel fortunate that he generously wrote a piece for me to include in my project. Aminikia's *I Will Greet the Sun Again* for string quartet with narration is based on a poem by Forough Farrokhzad and was premiered on March 31, 2021, at my lecture recital.

Prior to knowing of Shahab Paranj's compositional career, I came across his name as a virtuoso on multiple recordings and performances on *tonbak*, a Persian percussion instrument. My first encounter with his music was through a dear friend and cellist who performed Paranj's solo piece *Avaz-e Jan* for cello at a recital. I started to expand my knowledge of Paranj's works and realized his mastery in incorporating elements of Persian music in his compositions. When I reached out to him, he was thinking about writing a piece for solo violin to include in his *Avaz-e Jan* collection. This composition is the only solo piece on my album that was completed and premiered in the spring of 2021.

Since these five composers are all living, every aspect of this project has benefited from their direct guidance in helping me understand and perform their compositions. Their input has provided potent motivation for me to further educate myself about the music of my heritage and to find opportunities to perform pieces representing Iran's rich culture.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the processes through which these five native Iranian composers integrate elements of Iranian folk music into their compositions while keeping their Western classical music training in mind. Each chapter focuses on one composer and their represented work. Also included is an overview of each composer's background and musical studies with a focus on the life events that influenced their compositional processes.

The commonality among these five composers, beyond their nationality, is the influence of Persian music and culture on their represented compositions. Their approaches in integrating those elements, however, are distinctive and novel. Paranj and Darvishi were both inspired by ancient Persian instruments: the *tanbour* influences *Avaz-e Jan* by Paranj and the *gheichack-e Balouchi* influences Darvishi's string quartet. Paranj's use of *tanbour* techniques creates a sophisticated, virtuosic sound while Darvishi's use of *gheichack* techniques serves the narrative of his piece. Sahbai's composition showcases direct quotations of Iranian folk melodies. Vali takes a similar approach in the last two movements of *Love Drunk*, but he also adds two "imaginary folk songs" that are inspired by the style of Iranian folk melodies. Lastly, Aminikia's string quartet exemplifies an abstract adaptation of Persian musical elements and integrates an essential aspect of Persian culture, Persian poetry.

I aim to illustrate these points by performing and recording these five compositions. Musical examples in each chapter of this document are derived from represented pieces to display discussed concepts.

## CHAPTER 1: IRADJ SAHBAI

### LIEF, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES

Sahbai's compositional output reveals a strong affinity for Persian music and culture. His knowledge of Persian literature inspired him to find a universal sound, where East and West, tradition and innovation, collide. His vocal pieces are based on lyrics from Persian poetry. From the works of Nimâ Youshidj (1895-1959), founder of modern poetry in Iran, to those of the Persian poet and scholar Omar Khayyâm, Sahbai's music reflects the images evoked by their words.<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1945, in Tehran, Iran, Sahbai began his music studies with some of the most prominent Iranian musicians of his time such as Samin Baghchehban, Hossein Nasehi, Shifteh Sedqi, and Mostafa-Kamal Purtorab. While listening to Radio Tehran, he discovered Olivier Messiaen and pursued his dream of becoming Messiaen's student at the conservatories of Strasburg in Paris. During his studies with Messiaen, Sahbai became one of the composer's notable students and won an important composition prize.<sup>3</sup>

Sahbai has presented his compositions at the Atelier lyrique du Rhin, the Biennale de Paris, Ircam, the Manca festival in Nice, the Present musical d'Orléans, the Beauvais Festival, the Forbach Festival, the Dresdner Festival, the 38e Rugissants Festival in Grenoble, the Krakow Festival, the Kiev Festival, the "Nem" Ensemble of Montreal, the National Conservatory of Lyon and the Strasbourg Conservatory.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "BIOGRAPHIE," Iradj Sahbai, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www.iradjsahbai.com/biographie>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

In 1986, he founded the Schiltigheim Chamber Orchestra, dedicated to performing music from all centuries. A prominent conductor, he is regularly invited to guest conduct several orchestras including the Tehran Symphony Orchestra, the Sherbrooke Youth Orchestra of Canada, the Paris Harmony Orchestra, the Percussions de Strasbourg, the Orchestra of the Conservatory of Boulogne-Billancourt, the Parisian Orchestra, and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of London.<sup>5</sup>

When I heard Sahbai's arrangements of Iranian folk songs for piano, I was mesmerized by the haunting effect of his unique harmonies paired with some of the most popular Iranian melodies that I grew up with. Soon after that, I reached out to him about his interest in writing similar arrangements for the violin. He generously offered to arrange a set of seven folk songs for the violin and harp.

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<sup>5</sup> "BIOGRAPHIE," Iradj Sahbai, accessed on June 21, 2021, <https://www.iradjsahbai.com/biographie>.

### **EXPLORING THE PIECE: *Chants populaires pour violon et harpe***

This piece consists of seven movements of Persian folk songs for violin and harp. The composer has also arranged these songs for piano, soprano, and harp. Sahbai's approach for these seven songs is to use direct melodic quotes from Persian folk music repertoire. This is a more common style that distinguishes him from the other composers represented in this document.

Sahbai refers to these arrangements as “musical documentaries,” meaning that they preserve the most authentic version of popular Iranian folk melodies. The exact dates for the composition of the original songs are unknown. According to the native culture of the regions and as indicated by the dialects used in the songs, these tunes were passed down orally.<sup>6</sup> The main theme of these songs is love and affection and they often have a sad and nostalgic feeling attached to them.<sup>7</sup> Iranian musicologist and composer, Mohammadreza Darvishi states that sometimes in search of a better living situation, the people of the city and the countryside had to leave their hometown. They used to sing songs to express their homesickness, grief, and the desire to visit friends and family. He also mentions that the growth and development of folk literature are tied to people's effort for providing necessities of life. The prototypes included simple rituals performed during daily activities. Music was the means to create order and harmony in performing certain tasks.<sup>8</sup>

Another central theme of these songs is love and affection. Other than literal love songs there

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<sup>6</sup> Iradj Sahbai, E-mail to the author, March 5, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Iradj Sahbai, E-mail to the author, January 20, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Reza Darvishi, *Bist tarāne-ye mahalli-ye Fārs (Twenty traditional songs from Fars)*. (Tehrān: Mahoor, 1994).



Example 1.2:



Some of the ornamentations used by Sahbai contain an augmented second interval, which is one of the most significant intervals in Persian music as well as in many other Middle-Eastern countries (Refer to the last measure of example 1.2).

*Tahrir* and *tekiyeh* are both common embellishment techniques borrowed from vocal Iranian music. *tahreer*, also spelled *tahrir* in other literature, translates to any form of ornamentation, but in the context of traditional Iranian music it refers to a particular technique, thought to be inspired by the song of the nightingale. *tekiyeh/takiyeh* means to lean, and is an appoggiatura-like ornament that happens at the end of the main note, right before moving on to the next note. The performer slightly touches the upper neighbor note before moving on. Sometimes *tekiyeh* hints a further note than only a step higher. For an example of *tekiyeh*, refer to the examples below:

Example 3.1: Original melody

The image shows a musical score for a piano accompaniment and a vocal line. The piano part is in a 12/8 time signature and features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The vocal line is in a 12/8 time signature and features a melody with several measures. The melody includes a sequence of notes with a slur and a '4' above it, and another sequence with a slur and a '5' above it. The piano part includes dynamic markings like 'mf' and 'p'.

Example 3.2: Added *Tekiyeh*

In these folk songs, harmony and counterpoint are the main techniques that he uses to speak musically.<sup>11</sup> Iranian folk songs often contain an inherent longing for the past, and Sahbai highlights that longing with melancholic harmonies expressed by the harp. Sometimes, these dark harmonies act in counterpoint with some of the more lighthearted melodies in the violin part. This juxtaposition creates a unique sound that enhances the nostalgic feeling of each song differently. Sahbai tastefully complements the simplicity of original folk tunes by keeping the structure of his compositions rather minimal. This simplicity is noticeable in particular in ostinato motions in the harp throughout the movements.

As previously mentioned, each folk tune originates from a different region of Iran and reflects the region's unique dialect and expression. The seven movements are:

1) *Ascension*: a spiritual song in compound rhythm, unknown origin.

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<sup>11</sup> Iraj Sahbai, E-mail to author, January 20, 2021.

- 2) *Lalaili*: lullaby from Gorgan, northern Iran.
- 3) *Simay Jan*: love song from Gilan, Northern Iran.
- 4) *Asemoon be in gapi...*: love song from Shiraz, central Iran.
- 5) *Day balal*: a song describing a beautiful lover from central Iran.
- 6) *Damkol, Damkol*: love song adoration from Kurdistan, central Iran.
- 7) *Pache Leili*: an unrequited love song from northern Iran.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Iradj Sahbai, Interview with the author, July 9, 2021.

## CHAPTER 2: REZA VALI

### LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES

Reza Vali combines a passion for the folk music of his heritage with the methodology of a modern composer. It is an approach that he shares with Hungarian composer Bela Bartók, which led Western critics to dub Vali as the “Persian Bartók.” As has been noted, Vali “combines traditional work with modern compositional techniques, follows formal procedures and uses effective and enchanting rhythms.”<sup>13</sup>

Before he ever heard Bartók’s work, Vali was influenced by the Hungarian composer.<sup>14</sup> Vali wrote that after reading about Bartók’s love for folk music, he decided to collect Persian folk music:

“During my first year at the Tehran Music Conservatory, when I was 13 years old, I read in a music magazine that a Hungarian composer, Béla Bartók, collected Hungarian folk music. At that time, I did not know who Bartók was but the idea of collecting folk music appealed to me, and I started collecting folk music by asking people to sing a song and then transcribing it as well as I could. Later, when I left Iran to study in Europe and the U.S., I continued to collect tapes, cassettes, and CDs of Iranian folk music.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Antonio Baldassarre and Tatjana Markovic, “Music Cultures in Sounds, Word and Images,” Accessed June 21, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctv6jm9wd.

<sup>14</sup> Brent Reidy. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2012. [https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet\\_1026.pdf](https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet_1026.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Brent Reidy. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2013.

Vali started studying Persian music, first on his own, then with the master of the *santoor*,<sup>16</sup> Dr. Dariush Saghafi. He realized that the Western equal temperament<sup>17</sup> is a limited system and decided to start composing a series of pieces completely based on the microtonal scales of the Persian music system.<sup>18</sup> To better access microtonal intervals, Vali developed a software capable of replicating tuning systems from all over the world:

“I was blown away by the complexity and the vastness of this extraordinary musical system. Since I could not play a Persian instrument, I started developing a computer-based Persian keyboard, called the *arghonoon*, on which I could produce the sounds of Western instruments as well as Persian instruments and tune them to the microtonal scales of the Persian *Dástgâh/Mághâm* system.”<sup>19</sup>

Vali’s compositional style has taken a new direction since 2000 by breaking away from the European tuning system and writing music based on the Persian modal system.<sup>20</sup> He describes his compositional and aesthetic goals as the following:

- “1. to replace the European equal temperament tuning system with the Persian traditional tuning system or the Mixed Tuning system.
- “2. to replace European polyphony with Persian/Middle Eastern polyphony inherent in the *dastgâh/maghâm* system. This type of polyphony often exists in an implicit and background state that can be brought forward to an explicit and foreground level.
- “3. to replace European musical forms with the *dastgâh/maghâm* system’s musical forms such as mosaic elaboration and fluid stratification, as well as the musical

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<sup>16</sup> Persian hammer dulcimer.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/equal-temperament>, accessed June 26, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Reza Vali. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Reza Vali. CD booklet. “The book of calligraphy,” 2015.

forms of Persian/Middle Eastern medieval music.

“4. to expand the music’s rhythmic structure and include the rhythmic cycles of the *dastgâh/magham* system (called the *Usul*).”<sup>21</sup>

As one of the most acclaimed composers of the late 20th and early 21st century, Vali’s orchestral compositions have been performed in the United States by such orchestras as the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Seattle Symphony, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, the Baltimore Symphony, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, and Orchestra 2001.<sup>22</sup> He is a versatile composer whose chamber works have been performed by Cuarteto Latinoamericano, the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, the Carpe Diem String Quartet, Kronos Quartet, the Seattle Chamber Players, and the Da Capo Chamber Players.<sup>23</sup> Audiences in Europe, China, Chile, Mexico, Hong Kong, and Australia have attended performances of his work.<sup>24</sup> Deutsche Grammophon, Naxos, New Albion, MMC, Ambassador, Albany, and ABC Classics all have published his work.<sup>25</sup>

Vali was born in Ghazvin, Iran, in 1952. After finishing his early studies at Tehran Conservatory of Music in 1972, he moved to Austria to study at the Vienna Academy of Music.<sup>26</sup> He then moved to the United States to study at the University of Pittsburgh, where he

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<sup>21</sup> Reza Vali. CD booklet. “The book of calligraphy,” 2015.

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.cmu.edu/cfa/music/people/Bios/vali\\_reza.html](https://www.cmu.edu/cfa/music/people/Bios/vali_reza.html), accessed June 26, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Brent Reidy. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2012.

[https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet\\_1026.pdf](https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet_1026.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “BIOGRAPHY.” Reza Vali. Accessed 2019. <https://www.rezavali.com/biography>

<sup>26</sup> Brent Reidy. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2012.

[https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet\\_1026.pdf](https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet_1026.pdf)

earned his Ph.D. in music theory and composition.<sup>27</sup> Since 1988, he has been a member of the Carnegie Mellon University School of Music faculty.<sup>28</sup>

### **EXPLORING THE PIECE: *LOVE DRUNK* PERSIAN FOLK SONGS SET NO. 16B FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO**

Vali began composing a series of works based on Iranian folk music in 1978.<sup>29</sup> Each work contains a set of four to eight Persian folk songs that are numbered (i.e., Folk Songs, Set No. 1; Folk Songs, Set No. 2; and so on). Vali composed the majority of these works for voice with a variety of ensembles (voice and piano, voice and chamber ensemble, voice and orchestra), but others, such as the set presented on this project, are instrumental only. While some of these songs are completely original compositions inspired by and styled after Iranian traditional folk songs, several of them are arrangements of Persian tunes.<sup>30</sup>

The influence of Bartók's music is especially noticeable in the earlier folk song sets. In contrast, the later sets show a distinct departure from that style. For instance, set No. 8 (1989), which is written for soprano voice and chamber ensemble, is influenced by Wagner and

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<sup>27</sup> Brent Reidy. CD booklet. "Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain," 2012.  
[https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet\\_1026.pdf](https://www.bmop.org/sites/default/files/final.booklet_1026.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Mahler's late-romantic music. Furthermore, Set No. 14 (1999), written for chamber orchestra featuring solo soprano, bears traces of Debussy's influence.<sup>31</sup>

Vali wrote that he divided his folk song sets into “two general categories: authentic and imaginary. Authentic folk songs are ones that I have collected, and ‘imaginary folk songs’ (terminology borrowed from Bartók) are pieces that are written in the style of a folk song.”<sup>32</sup>

*Love Drunk* is the sixteenth collection within Vali’s folk songs cycle and was completed in July 2014. It was written for violin and piano and contains four songs representing both of the categories that Vali described—those based on authentic Persian folk songs and those composed in the style of a folk song.<sup>33</sup>

Love is a central theme in Vali’s folk songs. In each movement of *Love Drunk*, Vali reflects on a different aspect of love. In all four movements, Vali uses a variety of ornamentations that are suggestive of Persian traditional music. The phrasing and melody developments are inspired by Persian music improvisatory styles where the melody starts from a short motif, grows through repetition, and develops further. The piano accompaniment, in contrast, remains the same for most of the movement. These are the movements of the piece:

### *I. Longing*

The first movement, *Longing*, is an imaginary folk song reflecting on the lover longing for a reunion with his or her beloved.<sup>34</sup> In delivering this narrative, the composer uses multiple

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Reza Vali. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Reza Vali, *Love Drunk (Folk Songs, Set No.16N) for Violin and Piano*, Keiser Classical, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

*rubati*, *accelerandi*, and changes of tempo. The long-lasting ebb and flow of melodies played by both instruments lead the movement to its climax where the rhythm settles. Vali elongates the climax by emphasizing the augmented second interval for several measures. The final trill in the violin is an outburst of energy and emotion. This illustrates Vali's mastery of Iranian music where he combines an iconic interval in Persian music with an embellishment that is suggestive of common vocal ornamentations in Persian traditional music. Example 2.1 displays this style in the first movement.

Example 2.1

The musical score for Example 2.1 consists of two staves: Violin (Vi.) and Piano (Pno.). The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score begins at measure 22. The tempo markings are *Molto Rit* and *Adagio* (♩ = 40). The violin part features dynamic markings of *ff*, *sfz*, and *ff*. It includes a trill marked with a '3' and a fermata. The piano part features dynamic markings of *f* and *sfz*. It includes several measures marked 'Ped.' (pedal). The score concludes with a 2/4 time signature change.

After this musical peak, Vali gives the violin a monologue. Written in the lower register of the violin, this solo narrative sounds dark and mysterious. The movement ends with a reunion between the two instruments for which Vali uses the same material from the beginning of the movement in a higher register. With this reminder of the opening melody, the whole movement implies an ABA form.

## *II. In Memory of a Lost Beloved*

In this movement, Vali touches on one of the most difficult aspects of love, the grief of separation by death. This movement is a sorrowful dialogue between the grieving lover and his or her deceased beloved.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the movement, the piano provides supporting harmonies, while the violin develops a musical line suggestive of a Persian melismatic style of singing, *avaz*. Similar to what happens in *avaz*, phrases shape around a central pitch throughout the movement. The contrasting hemiola ostinato in the piano accompaniment paired with long phrases in the violin is essential to the mood of the second movement. What is striking about this movement is Vali's notation, which serves as guidance for the performer through long phrases. The rhythms are precisely written yet they indicate a sense of freedom in shaping the lines. Similar to a common style of phrasing in Persian vocal music, Vali uses embellishments to distinguish the cadences. Refer to example 2.2 for a comparison between the piano's hemiola and the long phrase in the violin. Notice how the phrasing is shaped around C-sharp leading to a cadence in measure 23:

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<sup>35</sup> Reza Vali, *Love Drunk (Folk Songs, Set No.16N) for Violin and Piano*, Keiser Classical, 2020.

## Example 2.2

The musical score for Example 2.2 is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 21-22) features a Violin (VI.) part starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a Piano (Pno.) accompaniment. The Violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents, and the Piano part has a bass line marked 'Reo'. The second system (measures 23-24) continues the Violin part with a dynamic change from mezzo-forte (*mf*) to forte (*f*), and the Piano part has a section marked '2' and 'Reo'.

Silence plays a crucial role in the second movement. Near the closing, Vali surprises us by putting a sudden end to piano ostinato. The silence creates space and leads to a calm violin solo which is soon interrupted by the ostinato accompaniment in the piano. From this moment, Vali creates a back-and-forth dialogue between the two instruments. Each time is deeper and softer in dynamics till it fades into a piano solo ending the movement.

Similar to the first movement, this movement is a great example of Vali's imaginary folk songs inspired by Persian folk melodies. In contrast to the first two movements, Vali directly quotes two authentic folk tunes from *Shiraz*, a city in central Iran, located close to the ruins of Persepolis.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Reza Vali. E-mail message to author. April 1st, 2021.

### III. The Girl from Shiraz

*The Girl from Shiraz* is a reflection on the spiritual aspect of love<sup>37</sup> for which Vali uses a Persian folk tune called *Dokhtar Shirazi*.<sup>38</sup> He uses famous themes from other parts of the world as well; for example, the opening theme of the movement played by the piano is taken from the carol *Silent Night*.<sup>39</sup> (Refer to example 2.3)

#### Example 2.3: *Silent Night*

**III. The Girl from Shirâz**

[H] Adagio ♩ = 42

Violin

Piano

*p* *mp*

L.V. L.V.

Leg. ----- Sempre Simile -----

\* Leave the sustain pedal down throughout this movement

<sup>37</sup> Reza Vali, *Love Drunk (Folk Songs, Set No.16N) for Violin and Piano*, Keiser Classical, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Reza Vali. E-mail message to author. March 24th, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Vali adds another layer of meaning to his composition by quoting the opening harmony of Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, the "Liebestod motive."<sup>40</sup> See example 2.4:

Example 2.4: "Love-death motive" from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*

The musical score for Example 2.4 consists of two staves: Violin (VI.) and Piano (Pno.). The Violin part begins with a 32-measure rest, followed by a melodic line in 3/8 time, then 4/4 time, and finally 3/4 time. It features a triplet of eighth notes and a fermata. The Piano part also begins with a 32-measure rest, followed by a harmonic accompaniment in 3/8, 4/4, and 3/4 time. The piano part includes dynamic markings of *mf*, *sfz*, and *mf*. A red box highlights the first two measures of the Piano part. The score includes tempo markings: *rit.*, *Molto rit.*, and *a tempo*. The piece ends with a double bar line and a star symbol.

<sup>40</sup> Reza Vali. E-mail message to author. March 24h, 2021.

The movement closes with the Indian rhythm *Ragavardhana* previously used by Olivier Messiaen in his *Quartet for the End of Time*.<sup>41</sup>

Example 2.5: the Indian rhythm *Ragavardhana* in the right hand of the piano.

The image shows a musical score for Violin (VI.) and Piano (Pno.). The Violin part is in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). It starts at measure 35 with a long note, followed by a series of eighth notes. The Piano part is in treble clef with a key signature of three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab). It starts at measure 35 with a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, including fingerings (5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5) and a melisma (15ma) over a long note. The score includes dynamic markings (ppp), a tempo marking (♩³), and a rehearsal mark (Ca 7''). The piece concludes with the instruction ATTACCA.

Similar to the previous movement, the third movement displays Vali's impression of the improvisatory canon in a performance of traditional Persian music. Vali wrote:

“In this section of a traditional performance, a master of voice improvises while an instrumentalist accompanies. However, the accompanist does not know exactly what the master will sing and has to wait and listen to the master's line before imitating the instrument. This delay in responding creates an intrinsic time lag which results in a unique form of polyphony typical of the *avaz* section in Persian music.”<sup>42</sup>

Notation for this kind of music can be obtuse, but Vali succeeds by his precise way of notation. Like the second movement, this movement centers around long-lasting melismatic

<sup>41</sup> Reza Vali. E-mail message to author. March 24h, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Reza Vali. CD booklet. “Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain,” 2013.

phrases in the violin. However, the accompaniment of this movement is distinguished from the second movement by its irregular rhythm, providing an unconfined reflection on an elegiac melodic line in the violin.

Vali's use of *glissando*<sup>43</sup> in this movement is also noticeable. Throughout the movement, glissandi fall between major seconds and often delay a cadence. This style of *glissando* is a unique effect, suggestive of an iconic vocal technique in Persian traditional music known as *tahrir*, as explained in the first chapter. In the following example, the lines between D-sharp and E-sharp indicate the glissandi.

Example 2.6: Vali's use of Glissando.

The musical score for Example 2.6 is written for Violin (VI.) and Piano (Pno.). It begins at measure 30. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 2/4, which changes to 3/4 in the second measure and returns to 2/4 in the third. The violin part features a melodic line with several glissandi, indicated by lines between D-sharp and E-sharp. The piano part provides accompaniment with chords and a bass line. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and fingerings.

<sup>43</sup> A continuous slide upward or downward between two notes.

#### IV. Love Drunk

*Love Drunk* is an outburst of joy when the lovers meet. Vali uses a well-known authentic Persian folk tune in this movement, *Mastom, Mastom*.<sup>44</sup> The following is a translation of the original lyrics for this folk melody:

Example 2.7: Original folk song *Mastom, Mastom*

#### Mastom Mastom I Am Drunk, I Am Drunk



[www.abcnotation.com/tunes](http://www.abcnotation.com/tunes)

A flower has bloomed on a tree.  
I cannot reach it,  
And it does not fall by itself.  
I am love drunk.  
Your thorn has torn my hand.  
Let's go to the Shâh-e-çerâgh<sup>45</sup>  
and make a promise of love.  
We will not be engaged  
If we break this promise.  
I am love drunk.  
Your thorn has torn my hand.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Reza Vali. E-mail message to author. March 24h, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Shâh-e-çerâgh is a mosque in Shiraz.

<sup>46</sup> Reza Vali. CD booklet. "Reza Vali: Toward That Endless Plain," 2013.

As the title suggests, the music in this movement consists of inebriating rhythms and flamboyant dynamics. The piano accompaniment is syncopated and upbeat, providing an energetic path for the violin. “With flair and schmalz like a folk musician”<sup>47</sup> is how Vali marks the violin entrance with the folk tune. In the repetitions of this melody, Vali adds a variety of ornamentations suggestive of the playing style of folk musicians. Refer to example 2.8 and compare it to the original folk tune in example 2.7 to recognize the embellishments.

Example 2.8: *Mastom, Mastom* folk melody with added ornamentations.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is in 4/4 time and features a folk melody with several notes marked with a sharp sign (#). Below this staff is a dynamic marking *f*. The bottom staff, labeled 'VI.', starts at measure 32 and is in 2/4 time. It contains a more complex, ornamented version of the melody with many slurs and accents. The piece concludes with two notes marked with a sharp sign (#) and a dynamic marking *sfz*.

In contrast to the other three movements, the phrases tend to be shorter and more flashy in this movement. The use of *sforzando*<sup>48</sup> is extensive through the movement, which highlights the articulations. The texture is more dense than that of three movements, but it lightens as the movement reaches the closing section. In the last section, which functions as a coda for the movement, Vali introduces new material. A whole-tone scale in the violin is accompanied in

<sup>47</sup> Reza Vali, *Love Drunk (Folk Songs, Set No.16N) for Violin and Piano*, Keiser Classical, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> A directive to perform the indicated note or chord of a composition with particular emphasis followed by a sudden decrease in loudness.

parallel motion by the piano. These simultaneous half-steps between the two instruments create a sense of pitch-bending that is suggestive of microtonal intervals in Persian music (refer to example 2.9). After a sequence of accented sixteenth notes played in unison, the movement ends energetically with “Bartók pizzicatos” in the violin,<sup>49</sup> accompanied by the piano marked with accented *sforzandi*. Example 2.10 shows this final passage.

Example 2.9:

The image shows a musical score for Example 2.9. The score is in 3/4 time, marked "Molto Meno Mosso" with a tempo of 69. It features dynamics like *sfz*, *pp sub.*, and *ff*, and includes markings for "rit." and "Molto rit.". A red box highlights a section of the score where the two instruments play in parallel motion, creating a sense of pitch-bending. The score includes staves for Violin (L.V.), Piano (P.), and Cello/Double Bass (Cdo.).

<sup>49</sup> To play a pizzicato, the string is pulled away from the fingerboard so that it snaps back percussively on the fingerboard.

## CHAPTER 3: SHAHAB PARANJ

### LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES

Shahab Paranj is one of the few composers from a younger generation whose works bridge Persian music and Western classical music. In sharing this quality with the other composers of this project, Paranj achieves a personal musical language through combining rhythms and elements of Persian music with Western forms. His compositions have been hailed as “unique” by composer John Adams for a distinctive compositional style.<sup>50</sup> An ambassador for Iranian culture, Paranj’s works have received recognition from the Mehr Humanitarian Society (2010) and the city and county of San Francisco (2011) for promoting Persian culture and music.<sup>51</sup>

Paranj grew up learning how to play *tombak*, the Persian goblet drum, from his father. He continued his music studies on the cello at Tehran Music School.<sup>52</sup> He was a teenager when he started writing music for an Iranian commercial company, which made him interested in composition as a career.<sup>53</sup> He stated: “Through this experience, I learned how to listen to my music from the audience’s perspective and to write effective music while having limited time for each commercial.”<sup>54</sup> Through the connections he made at the company, he was invited to write an original score for the movie *Dressage*, a successful production and the winner of the 2018 feature film in the “Generation” section of the Berlin Film Festival.<sup>55</sup> As an

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<sup>50</sup> Shahab Paranj, “ABOUT.” Accessed June 22, 2021. [https://www.paranj.com/?page\\_id=7](https://www.paranj.com/?page_id=7).

<sup>51</sup> “Shahāb Pāranj.” Accessed June 22, 2021. <https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/people/shahab-paranj/>

<sup>52</sup> Luosha Fang, “Interview with my friend Shahab Paranj,” YouTube Video, 42:47. April 20, 2020, <https://youtu.be/QzndPJCvNXM>

<sup>53</sup> Shahab Paranj. Interview with the author. June 27, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Luosha Fang, “Interview with my friend Shahab Paranj,” YouTube Video, 42:47. April 20, 2020, <https://youtu.be/QzndPJCvNXM>

instrumentalist, Paranj has appeared in several concerts and recordings on *Tombak*. His virtuosity in playing this instrument has provided him several opportunities to collaborate with internationally acclaimed artists, including Mohammadreza Shajarian, who is known as “a national treasure” and “the undisputed master of Persian traditional (classical) singing.”<sup>56</sup>

A recent graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles, Paranj has benefited from working with David Garner, Conrad Susa, Richard Danielpour, Ian Krouse, and David Lefkowitz during his composition studies. His works have been commissioned by renowned ensembles from all around the world, including the Russian String Orchestra, Intersection Contemporary Music Ensemble, Long Beach Opera, Aleron Trio, San Francisco New Music Ensemble, One Great City Duo, Manhattan School of Music symphony orchestra, and the International Low Brass Trio.<sup>57</sup>

### **EXPLORING THE PIECE: AVAZ-E JAN FOR SOLO VIOLIN**

“The music which is played by *tanbour* and sung by people is the universe’s sound, crying out loud” — *Rumi*<sup>58</sup>

As the oldest and most genuine Iranian instrument, *tanbour* holds a special place in Paranj’s composition of *Avaz-e Jan*. The original two-stringed version of this pear-shaped instrument, *dotar*, is the forefather of this type of stringed instrument that has traveled far and wide in time and space and has taken on different names and shapes.<sup>59</sup> According to Shapour Suren-Pahlav, “The term *dotâr* does not appear in early texts, but this same instrument was

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<sup>56</sup>“Mohammad Reza Shajarian,” accessed June 28, 2021, <https://mohammadrezashajarian.com>.

<sup>57</sup> “Shahab Paranj,” accessed June 22, 2021, [https://www.paranj.com/?page\\_id=7](https://www.paranj.com/?page_id=7).

<sup>58</sup> Ganji, Shadi. “Tanbur, a Persian Traditional Musical Instrument.” Translated by Zarrin Najafi, *Apochi*, [apochi.com/tanbour-kermanshan-iran/](http://apochi.com/tanbour-kermanshan-iran/).

<sup>59</sup> Shapour Suren-Pahlav, “IRANIAN MUSIC: TANBUR (GUITAR).” *The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies*, accessed June 22, 2021, [www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Music/tanbur.htm](http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Music/tanbur.htm).

probably described under the term *tanbour*.<sup>60</sup> Nowadays, *tanbour* and *dotar* are used interchangeably and share common playing techniques.<sup>61</sup> Found in different parts of Persia, *tanbour* plays an essential role in the history of Iranian music and culture. As a plucked instrument, the inspirational role of *tanbour* in Paranj's piece is most reflected in pizzicati and strumming techniques used on the violin. Paranj creates unusual timbre and virtuosic passages in violin by command of using fingernails for these techniques. While working with Paranj, I realized his intention in writing these techniques is not only to mimic the sound of *dotar* and *tanbour* but also to create a sonic quality that is unexplored and novel on the violin. He encourages the performer to find a sound that has not been heard before from the violin.<sup>62</sup>

The most distinctive technique of this kind Paranj introduces in *Avaz-e Jan* is *rasgueado*, a technique that originated as a style of strumming on the *tanbour* and *dotar* and has found its way to different parts of world music, including Spain. Nowadays *rasgueado* is mostly associated with flamenco guitar and is executed by rapid strumming in precise rhythmic patterns.<sup>63</sup>

An essential source of inspiration for Paranj in *Avaz-e jan* is the Persian modal system, *dastgāh*.<sup>64</sup> Persian classical music as practiced today is mostly based on seven primary modes called *dastgāh*, and five secondary modes called *avāz*. The collection of these twelve modes, including more than 250 short units called *gusheh*, provides the main source, called *radif*, for improvisation or composition in Iranian classical music. In this system, the melody can be organized into different tonal spaces depending on *dastgah*. The pitch structure is the most

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Shahab Paranj, interview with author, June 23, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Shahab Paranj, interview with author, March 8, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

specific characteristic of each mode which involves microtonal intervals.<sup>65</sup> Inspired by the concept of *dastgah*, Paranj uses microtonal intervals in *Avaz-e Jan*.

There are several theories suggested by philosophers, theorists, encyclopedists, and musicians that define an accurate measurement system for Persian traditional music. It is a particularly complex task since the concept of interval in Iranian music depends on the musical atmosphere of related modes.<sup>66</sup> From this perspective, the Iranian tuning system can be compared with expressive intonation in classical music. The legendary cellist Pablo Casals believed that the placing of each note on the fingerboard is determined by the context. From his point of view, tone and intonation are inseparable concepts that can majorly affect expressiveness in playing an instrument.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in Iranian music, intervals are determined by the mood and spirit of the *gusheh* or *dastgah*.

Since the structure of scales in Persian music is based on ascending or descending step by step intervals (tetrachord or pentachord), the second intervals are the most important. In his book, *A New Approach to Theory of Persian Art Music*, Hormoz Farhat suggests the theory of flexible intervals by which he categorized all second intervals in Persian music in four different groups: Minor second, neutral tone (small and large), major second and plus-tone. (Table 3.1)<sup>68</sup> As can be seen in Table 3.1, except for the major and minor second, there are two other types of seconds in this system that are smaller than a semitone. However, their size is approximate, explaining the flexibility of those intervals.

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<sup>65</sup> Jason Gereben, "Shahab Paranj," accessed June 22, 2021, [https://www.paranj.com/?page\\_id=44++%2C+By+Jason+Greiben](https://www.paranj.com/?page_id=44++%2C+By+Jason+Greiben).

<sup>66</sup> Farshad Sanati, "AN INVESTIGATION ON THE VALUE OF INTERVALS IN PERSIAN MUSIC," (2020). University of Jyväskylä Master's Thesis, pp. 14-15.

<sup>67</sup> "Cellist Pablo Casals on Expressive Intonation," *The Strad*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.thestrad.com/playing/cellist-pablo-casals-on-expressive-intonation/1434.article>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Table 3.1.

Interval	Symbol	Size	Size (Cent)
<b>Semitone or minor second</b>	M	$\frac{1}{2}$ interval	90
<b>Small neutral tone</b>	N	$\frac{3}{4}$ interval	130-135
<b>Large neutral tone</b>	N	$\frac{3}{4}$ interval	160-165
<b>Whole tone or Major second</b>	M	$\frac{4}{4}$ interval	204
<b>Plus-tone</b>	P	$\frac{5}{4}$ interval	270

Technically, the violin is not restricted by the twelve-tone system of Western art music, meaning microtonal intervals of Iranian modes are playable on the violin. As someone who grew up with Iranian music, I have the privilege of carrying these intervals deep in my ear and in what Paranj refers to as “historical memory.”<sup>69</sup> However, as a classically trained violinist, I had to train my muscle memory to achieve consistency in playing these intervals through intense listening and internalization of microtones.

The Example 3.2 is an excerpt from the first movement of *Avaz-e Jan* which demonstrates Paranj’s use of microtonal intervals. Here the A will be placed approximately between A-natural and A-flat on the fingerboard.

<sup>69</sup> Shahab Paranj, interview with the author, March 8, 2021.

### Example 3.2: Microtonal Intervals Notation



Paranj's use of *scordatura* is notable in creating an unconventional timbre in the violin. In this case, the E string is tuned a whole step lower to D which resonates with the lower D string more than E. It also softens the sharpness of higher register passages and homogenizes the overall sound effect of the piece. Paranj continuously encouraged me to play melismatic passages *sul tasto* (over the fingerboard) and to find a unified sound that has the introverted quality of Iranian solo improvisations.<sup>70</sup>

#### I. *Khorāsān*

*Khorāsān*, meaning "where the sun arrives from" or "the Eastern Province," is the name of a region in northeastern Iran, where *tanbour* and *dotar* are widely used.<sup>71</sup> As previously mentioned, certain playing techniques on these two instruments as they are used in *Khorāsān* are shared with their related instruments in other parts of the country as well as the neighboring countries. These shared features are the main source of inspiration for Paranj in using these instruments in his composition. The opening part of the first movement highlights Paranj's use

<sup>70</sup> Shahab Paranj, interview with author, March 8, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Shahab Paranj, interview with author, June 25, 2021.

of *rasgueado*. For executing *rasgueado* on violin, the performer must use all fingers in order from pinky to the index finger in a downward motion. To get better contact with strings as well as a different timbre, it would be crucial to use the nails rather than the soft part of the fingers. Refer to Table 3.2 for the notation of *rasgueado*.

Each movement of *Avaz-e Jan* has a different structure and is composed in a different style. The first movement, *Khorasan*, is suggestive of one of the most common styles of Iranian vocal music, *āvāz*. The most striking characteristic of *āvāz* is its rhythmic structure. Gen'ichi Tsuge in “Rhythmic Aspects of the *āvāz* in Persian Music,” describes *āvāz* as a “unique rhythmic texture of unmeasured *rubato*.”<sup>72</sup> Unlike most other forms in Iranian music, *āvāz* is not based on a definite meter and takes its rhythmic organization from the verses sung. Similarly, in the first movement of *Avaz-e Jan*, the rhythmic organization of the movement comes from phrasing and has a non-metric structure to it.

Coming from a percussionist background, Paranj is particularly at ease with creating novel rhythmic gestures and using percussive effects in this movement. The variety of rhythmic figures that Paranj introduces in the first movement is remarkable. Tapping simultaneously on the wood and bowing on the open strings provides a unique texture.

The overall sound effect of the first movement is highly suggestive of Iranian improvisatory music. In working with Paranj, he continually reminded me of the characteristic approach and stage presence of Iranian traditional instrumentalists while improvising on their instrument: the performer, instrument, and all playing techniques convey a spiritual value that gives meaning to the performance. Some Iranian scholars, including Dariush Safvat, use the term *hāl*, meaning a condition or state, to describe this essential element in Persian music.

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<sup>72</sup> Gen'ichi Tsuge, “Rhythmic Aspects of the *Āvāz* in Persian Music.” *Ethnomusicology* 14 (1970): 205. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/849797>

Unlike technique, *hāl* is an emotional and mental quality that can't be taught, Safvat states. He also specifies “purity, sincerity, modesty, and devotion” as hallmarks of the authentic *hāl*.<sup>73</sup> The sense of “getting out of one's physical self” is the quality that Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes as *hāl* for musicians.<sup>74</sup> In practice, this can be seen as an artist unified with their instrument and purely connected to the music. Similarly, this piece requires the performer to develop that mindset which is characteristic of Iranian musicians.

### II and III. *Chu Bazī*<sup>75</sup>

Unlike the improvisational and impulsive first movement, the second movement is strictly metrical with a steady pulse. It takes its name from a category of folk dance in Iran, *čūb-bāzī*, in which performers carry sticks and create a rhythmic pattern by striking them together while dancing. The sonic quality of the second movement is comparable to the sound of *pizzicati* that are played with the nail. While playing regular *pizzicati* requires the performer to play with the soft part of the finger, here Paranj asks the performer to use the nail. As previously stated, the rhythm is stable throughout the movement, but the meter alternates between simple and compound, a trait similarly used in some of the Iranian rhythmic compositional forms.

The third movement begins *attacca*<sup>76</sup> after a variation of the *rasgueado* passage that occurs at the opening of the first movement. The texture changes, as this movement replaces

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<sup>73</sup> Dariush Safvat, “Erfān wa musiqi-e irāni,” in Dāriuš Šafwat and Ḥasan Mašhun, *Do maqāla dar bāra-ye musiqi-e irāni*, Tehran, 1348 Š./169, p. 99.

<sup>74</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Influence of Sufism on Traditional Persian Music,” in *Studies of Comparative Religion*, p.230.

<sup>75</sup> Čūb-bāzī or "stick game"; also, *raqs-e čūb* or "stick dance." [https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Anthropology/chub\\_bazi.htm](https://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Anthropology/chub_bazi.htm).

<sup>76</sup> Attack at once —used as a direction in music at the end of a movement to begin the next without pause

strumming with *arco*.<sup>77</sup> The relationship of these two movements for Paranj is so significant that he prefers not to choose a separate title for movement III. This movement is the continuation of the second movement, *Chou Bazi*, and is developed from the material we heard in both previous movements. Combining simple and compound meters is a technique that Paranj uses again. By contrast, he offers more drastic harmonic modulations in this movement. In terms of register and dynamics, he creates more contrasting shades in this movement. What can be heard is a culmination of all ideas and motives Paranj planted throughout the piece.

As previously discussed, Paranj uses several extended techniques in this piece:

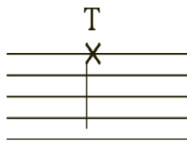
Table 3.2: Extended techniques



In order from the little finger  
to the index finger

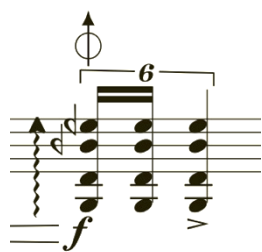


Bow and left-hand *pizzicato* at  
the same time



Tap on the fingerboard

<sup>77</sup> With the bow — usually used as a direction in music for players of stringed instruments — compare *pizzicato*.



Use the entire phalanx to hold  
the pitch

## CHAPTER 4: MOHAMMAD REZA DARVISHI

### LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES

Iranian scholar, author, and composer, Mohammad Reza Darvishi was born in the city of Shiraz, Iran, in 1955. He started learning music at age 11 when he began violin lessons. Later he learned to play piano, trumpet, and saxophone. He studied composition at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tehran University. He was a student there at the same time as Parviz Meshkati, composer and master of the *santur*, the Persian dulcimer, and as Hossein Alizadeh, composer, and master of the Persian *Tar* and *setar*. This generation of musicians became pioneers in Iran classical music and influenced the next generations of musicians in different respects. Among them, Darvishi dedicated his life to finding the forgotten roots of Iranian music and culture. His research, recording, and performance of Iranian regional music mark a significant breakthrough in Iranian music scholarship. In recognition of his achievements, Darvishi was nominated for the achievement of UNESCO's award for the greatest musician worldwide, in 2005.

Darvishi has traveled to the most remote villages and cities of Iran for about thirty years to study each region's music and culture, a term he uses to refer to the music of different parts of the country we know as Iran. While conducting his research, Darvishi has collected several recordings of this music by participating in different regions' social gatherings and ceremonies himself. He has lived in these places to absorb their culture and understand their music.<sup>78</sup>

It takes tremendous dedication to spend most of one's life traveling in order to find and preserve the dying roots of one's culture. I found Darvishi's motivations compelling as captured in his book, *Among the Songs and Silences: Selection of Writings and Speeches*:

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<sup>78</sup> Stanford Iranian Studies Program, "The Archaeology of a Sound: Searching for the music of Abdolqader Maraqi - Part 2," YouTube video, 1:24, October 14, 2015, <https://youtu.be/bXEc3di3JEI>.

“In my opinion, working with music is not a profession, nor is it an art in the literal sense of the word. Knowing or equating art and profession is also not desired. For me, music is not a tool that can only express emotion either, nor a tool that can only convey a thought, because I think the expression of feeling and the expression of thought alone are limited realms that come from the infinite expanse of life. For me, music is the most important motivation for the continuation of life with all its dimensions, and we may know that the dimensions of life — and not just being alive — are very complex and colorful.

... When I look back, I see that despite the ups and downs, I have been able to live and not just be alive, and my effort has been to achieve the various reflections and aspects of human existence.”<sup>79</sup>

Darvishi has published several books and released multiple CDs regarding his findings about Iran’s regional music, most importantly, *The Encyclopedia of Iranian Musical Instruments*, which was awarded the Society for Ethnomusicology’s best publication of the year on musical instruments in 2002.<sup>80</sup> In this book, Darvishi has used a specific classification based on the playing techniques and styles of the most remarkable players of each instrument. He states: “Every master (highly skilled player) has an aesthetic in his ear. This (book) is a treatise based on this human aesthetics.”<sup>81</sup>

A remarkable portion of Darvishi’s research is dedicated to studying compositions of the most important Iranian composer of the 14th century, Abdolqader Maraḡi, known as “the

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<sup>79</sup> Mohammad Reza Darvishi, *از از میان سرودها و سکوتها: گزیده نوشتار و گفتار* (Among the Songs and Silences: Selection of Writings and Speeches) Translated by author, (Tehran: Mahoor, 1380,) 44.

<sup>80</sup>Peoplepill.com. "About Mohammad-Reza Darvishi: Iranian Musician (1955-)" Accessed July 3, 2021. <https://peoplepill.com/people/mohammad-reza-darvishi>.

<sup>81</sup>“Mohammad Reza Darvishi at the launch of his new album,” ISNA, February 23, 2019, <https://www.isna.ir/amp/97120401693/>

greatest of Persian writers in music.”<sup>82</sup> In preserving Abdolqader Maraqi’s surviving compositions, Darvishi established an ensemble to perform and publish his compositions.<sup>83</sup>

### **EXPLORING THE PIECE: *REINCARNATION* FOR STRING QUARTET**

More than anything, *Reincarnation* reflects Darvishi’s interest in the music of Southern Iran and the traditional rituals that have been practiced in the region for centuries.<sup>84</sup> Melody is the most important aspect of the cultural music of Southern Iran, and it accompanies the most important life events and ceremonies, including weddings, birth, harvesting, funerals, religious rites, holidays, festivals, and even music therapy.<sup>85</sup>

Darvishi is deeply inspired by one of the most eminent forms of ceremonial music in *Baluchistan*.<sup>86</sup> The people of this region believe in the existence of mysterious and filthy diseases caused by the devil that disrupt a person’s psychosomatic balance. They also believe that it is only the music that can dispel the unclean spirit from one’s soul and restore it to health. The ceremony through which the healing takes place is called *Gwati*, literally meaning “wind” or “windiness.” Music and dance are the two principles of *Gwati*. Through repetitive musical motifs and unified body movements, the patient goes to different stages of self-awareness and reaches the point of rapture. The final stage of the healing process leads to

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<sup>82</sup> E. J. van Donzel, *Islamic Desk Reference: Compiled from The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994,) under Abd al-Qadir.

<sup>83</sup> Stanford Iranian Studies Program, “The Archaeology of a Sound: Searching for the music of Abdolqader Maraqi - Part 2,” YouTube video , 1:24, October 14, 2015, <https://youtu.be/bXEc3di3JEL>.

<sup>84</sup> Mohammad Reza Darvishi, Phone Interview with the author, March 20, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Mohammad Taghi. Massoudieh, “BALUCHISTAN iv. Music of Baluchistan,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, III, /6, pp. 644-645, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/baluchistan-iv>.

<sup>86</sup> A city in the south-east of Iran that shares a border with Afghanistan.

unconsciousness. The ceremony can last between three and seven nights, for the duration of one to four hours each night, depending on the patient.<sup>87</sup>

## MOVEMENT I

Several musical aspects of the *Gwati* ceremony are reflected in Darvishi's quartet. Throughout the piece, Darvishi creates sounds that are suggestive of the playing techniques of the *gheichak-e Balouchi*, a common instrument in the south of Iran used for the ceremony. In playing this instrument, the left hand mostly stays in one position. Wide *glissandi* that create pitch-bending effects are common in playing the *gheichak* as the fingers reach the higher positions on the fingerboard. Another musical characteristic of this instrument is the frequent use of open strings as drones. Darvishi combines these *glissandi*, ornamentations, and the drones to create a novel sound that replicates the pitch-bending quality of *gheichak*. Refer to example 4.1 and notice the half-step interval between cello and viola while playing *glissandi*.

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<sup>87</sup> Mohammad Taghi. Massoudieh, "BALUCHISTAN iv. Music of Baluchistan," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, III, /6, pp. 644-645, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/baluchistan-iv>.

## Example 4.1

Harmonically, this movement is chromatic with several unresolved dissonances. The texture is dense, but it highlights the solo sections in violin and cello. The expressionist sound of this movement perfectly suits the title of the piece.

MOVEMENT II. *FUGE AND CONVERSATIONS*

Darvishi uses two ancient Farsi terms in structuring the second movement. Both terms refer to an ancient musical form in Persian music.<sup>88</sup> The opening is marked with “*Sarkhane*,” meaning a loud voice or a call, which is equivalent to the subject in a Western art music fugue. The countersubject’s equivalent is marked with “*Molazeme*,” which means companionship in Farsi.<sup>89</sup> As the title suggests, this movement is fugal. *Sarkhane* in this movement is a theme that consists of 27 beats. Using compound meters throughout the movement creates long-lasting phrases that are commonly used in ancient Persian music. Example 4.2 shows the first appearance of *Sarkhane* in the viola.

<sup>88</sup> Mohammad Reza, Darvishi, Phone interview with author. March 13, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

## Example 4.2

$\text{♩} = 45 (4+5+5+2+3+8)$

sarkhane

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla. *mp*

Vc.

④

The musical score consists of four staves: Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 45, with a parenthetical breakdown (4+5+5+2+3+8). The Vln. I and Vln. II parts are mostly rests, with the word 'sarkhane' written above them. The Vla. part has a melodic line starting with a quarter note, marked *mp*. The Vc. part is mostly rests. The score is divided into measures by vertical dashed lines, with time signatures 2/4, 3/4, and 8/4 indicated. A circled number 4 is above the first measure of the Vln. I staff.

## CHAPTER 5: SAHBA AMINIKIA

### LIFE, PATH, AND MUSICAL VALUES

Sahba Aminikia's unique life and experiences are central inspirations for his compositions. Born in Tehran in 1981, his Iranian family was Baha'i. After Islam, the Baha'i faith is the largest religion in Iran.<sup>90</sup> However, governmental persecutions against Baha'is have deprived many people of their basic rights, including education. Aminika left Iran to pursue an education and his love and passion for music. He studied first in Russia at St. Petersburg State Conservatory and immigrated to the U.S. to study at San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

He is an Iranian-American composer whose music is affected by both cultures. He points out: "My compositional style is inspired by Persian traditional music, revolutionary songs from the 1980s of Iran, electronic music, lullabies, call of prayer, jazz, rock, pop, Dimitry Shostakovich, Pink Floyd, Queen and many other incredible musicians that I met or I am inspired by."<sup>91</sup>

As a child, Aminikia was exposed to the poetry of Rumi, Saadi, and Hafiz. Regarding his compositions, he states: "The inspiration comes from thousands of years of poetry, and the culture that I grew up in. I used to listen to children's audiobooks when I was a child in Iran, and since then, words and music are eternally interwoven in my psyche."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Moojan Momen, *"The Constitutional Movement and the Baha'is of Iran: The Creation of an 'Enemy Within'."* British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 39, no. 3 (2012): 328-45. Accessed July 8, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Sahba Aminikia. E-mail message to the author, March 6, 2021..

<sup>92</sup> Ibid..

Inspired by social and political events in his home country, Aminikia has achieved a unique storytelling quality in his music that reflects his personal experiences. Hope is a central theme for Aminikia, even in his works with a dark narrative.<sup>93</sup> This is reflected in his piece *I Will Greet the Sun Again*.

Aminikia views his compositions as a tool to connect performers with their audiences. He notes: “I write music for performers and audience, and I see myself as a simple bridge between the source and the aforementioned two.”<sup>94</sup> He also emphasizes that his compositional process changes from performer to performer: “I see performer’s strength and vulnerabilities and then try to expose, hide or amplify those to the audience. This process makes every project and every interaction unique for me.”

A classically trained composer, Aminikia blends Western music structure with the elements of Persian music. His approach to harmony is post-tonal given that he uses pitch-centricity in a non-traditional way. One of the main characteristics of his works is an unconventional timbre that he creates by using uncommon registers for different instruments. This unique trait is present in *I Will Greet the Sun Again*.

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<sup>93</sup> Sinella Aghasi Moshabad, “History, Politics, and Religion in the Life and Compositions of Sahba Aminikia” (2019). LSU Doctoral Dissertations. [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_dissertations/4815](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4815)

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

## **EXPLORING THE PIECE: *I WILL GREET THE SUN AGAIN FOR STRING QUARTET WITH NARRATION***

According to the composer, this piece is spiritually inspired by the first 25 years of his life, when he was growing up in Tehran, Iran.<sup>95</sup> He also states that the process of writing this piece was different than those of his other works because he rarely writes music for an ensemble in which a Persian-speaking performer is present.<sup>96</sup>

Most importantly, Aminikia acknowledges Forough Farrokhzad's poetry as the main source of inspiration for this piece: "Forough Farrokhzad, a 1960's poetess from Iran, is a rare find in Iranian literature. Her bold, sensual, and poetic language in her poetry shakes the pillars of conservatives and the male-dominated literature scene of Iran and flies through the air like a breeze of fresh air."<sup>97</sup> She was a controversial modernist whose poetry remained banned from publishing for more than a decade after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Aminikia adds: "Despite being banned from publishing, the inspiration generated by her sustains itself through generations such as my generation."<sup>98</sup>

As mentioned previously, Aminikia considers the performer's interest when he composes a piece such as this. In this case, he asked me to choose one of Forough Farrokhzad's poems. The fruit of this collaboration is a single-movement piece for string quartet with

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<sup>95</sup> Sahba Aminikia, E-mail message to the author, March 6, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

narrations based on a poem by Forough Farrokhzad. Following is an English translation of the poem:<sup>99</sup>

I will greet the sun again  
 and the little river that once ran in me  
 and the clouds that were my ruminations  
 and the aching blooms of poplar trees,  
 my companions in those seasons of drought.  
 I will greet the crowd of crows again,  
 who brought me their rich perfumes,  
 gifts from gardens of the night,  
 and my mother who lived in the mirror  
 and whose shape was the shape of my old age.

I will greet the earth again,  
 who in her lust to create me again,  
 fills her fiery belly with seeds of green.  
 I am coming, I am coming, I will come again,  
 with my long hair dripping the scent of dirt,  
 with my eyes inflicting the density of darkness,  
 with brambles, I've picked from the far side of the wall.  
 I am coming, I am coming, I will come again,  
 and the doorway once more will be filled with love  
 and I'll greet the lovers standing in the doorway,  
 and the little girl there  
 still standing in love.

Aminikia's musical language in this piece reveals the soulful atmosphere of the poem.

The main motif used by Aminikia throughout the piece is highly suggestive of Persian folk melodies. Aminikia's approach in using glissandi, ornamentations, and trills creates an effect that matches the spirit and musical shapes of Iranian folk melodies. The main melodic fragment

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<sup>99</sup> Paul Weinfield, "Forough Farrokhzad: 'I Will Greet the Sun Again,'" Translations, February 8, 2015, <https://paulweinfieldtranslations.wordpress.com/2014/12/15/forough-farrokhzad-i-will-greet-the-sun-again/>.

repeats through the piece in smaller and expanded versions. The example below shows the passing of the theme between the two violins:

Example 5.1

Throughout the piece, the quartet violinists read the poem in both Farsi and English. Aminikia aims to provide an opportunity for the audience to hear the poem in Farsi and become familiar with the phonology of this beautiful language. On the other hand, he makes it more accessible for an international audience by adding an English translation after each stanza. His thoughtfulness in reaching a wider audience is reflected by his preference to have both a female and male narrator.<sup>100</sup>

The piece opens with the first line of the poem, “I Will Greet the Sun Again.” The use of open strings and perfect intervals create an archaic sound that complements the nostalgia of the words. Soon after the first segment of the poem in Farsi, we hear a melismatic theme played by the first violin, which serves as an invitation to the second violinist to give a

<sup>100</sup>Sahba Aminikia, Interview with author, March 13, 2021.

translation of what was spoken. There are two sections where all four instruments come together without narration and create a dialogue developed from the thematic material used previously. Both instrumental sections sound powerful and rich. However, Aminikia saves the big arrival for the very last part of the piece, which tastefully suits the last statement of the poem. Both the poem and the music come to a hopeful close. Throughout the piece, Aminikia explores a novel voice-leading by giving the lower register melody to the first violin and higher ones to the second violin. (Refer to example 5.2) He also creates a rare effect at the end of the piece by putting the viola in a higher register than violins resembling the openness and faith of the last statement in the poem (Example 5.3):

“...and the doorway once more will be filled with love  
and I’ll greet the lovers standing in the doorway,  
and the little girl there  
still standing in love.”  
— Forough Farrokhzad

Example 5.2

4

63

The musical score for Example 5.2 consists of four staves. The top staff is for Violin I, the second for Violin II, the third for Viola, and the bottom for Cello/Double Bass. The score begins at measure 63. The Violin I part features a triplet of eighth notes followed by a quarter note, then a triplet of eighth notes. The Violin II part starts with a half note, then a triplet of eighth notes, and continues with a series of eighth notes. The Viola part features a series of glissandos, indicated by the word 'gliss.' and a wavy line. The Cello/Double Bass part features a series of eighth notes, with a dynamic marking of *mp* at the beginning. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, glissandos, and dynamics.

Example 5.3

92  $\text{♩} = 60$  می ایام ، می ایام ، می ایام ..... و استانه پر از عشق می شود

*p* *p* *mf* *mf* *ppp*

I am coming, I am coming,  
I will come again.

101 و من در استانه به آنها که دوست می دارند و دختری که هنوز آنجا ، در استانه پرعشق ایستاده . سلامی دوباره خواهیم داد

*mf*

and the doorway  
once more will  
be filled with love

and I'll greet the lovers standing in the doorway,  
and the little girl there still standing in love.

## CONCLUSION

‘Unheard Voices of Iran’ started with the goal of promoting compositions by Iranian composers to an international audience. One of the primary purposes of this project is to diversify the violin literature by adding these works to the repertoire and presenting them to a bigger community and the world.

As a second language English speaker, I realize that through learning a language one can reach an understanding of a culture and a nation. Similarly, folk music plays an essential role in mirroring the cultural traditions of an ethnic group. While learning a language requires a certain amount of time commitment and practice, hearing a folk tune can immediately provide a strong connection to a culture. As an oral tradition, folk music provides insight into the history or culture of a country and links the past to present by passing down stories about people’s daily life and concerns. Considering this significant role of music in a world filled with anti-Iran political views, I find it vital to promote the music that represents the rich culture of my country. This project is dedicated to five folk-inspired compositions by five living Iranian composers who share a genuine affection towards Persian folk music.

Love, spirituality, hope, nostalgia, and longing are among some of the most prevalent concepts incorporated in these five compositions. These elements are commonly framed in a narrative character, the generous use of glissandi, grace notes, melismatic motifs, improvisatory gestures, and parlando-rubato rhythm of folk music.

In each chapter, I discussed how these five composers integrate elements of Persian music into their works in the context of their Western classical training. From solo violin to string quartet, we see five different approaches towards incorporating Iranian music elements

within western classical music textures and structures. Iradj Sahbai and Reza Vali share an interest in the direct quotation of original Persian folk tunes. This approach shapes Sahbai's *Seven Folk Songs for Violin and Harp* by showcasing some of the most popular Iranian folk tunes. He creates a 'musical documentary' by preserving these seven tunes in their most original versions. Vali takes this approach a step further by using original melodies in a new sonic environment in two movements of *Love Drunk* for violin and piano. He expands his palette by adding two 'imaginary folk tunes' in the style of Persian folk song.

For Shahab Paranj, two of the most ancient Iranian instruments, *tanbour* and *dotar*, are the primary sources of inspiration. His use of a more sophisticated rhythm and microtonal intervals enhances Iranian-sounding effects in his solo piece for Violin, *Avaz-e Jan*. For the two last pieces Mohammadreza Darvishi and Sahba Aminikia choose the string quartet for their compositions. Darvishi highlights the storytelling aspect of his quartet, *Reincarnation*, by incorporating elements of a ritual tradition from southern Iran, *Gwati*. He also uses playing techniques of *gheichak-e Baluchi* that creates a sound reminiscent of the commonly used music in this ritual.

From another perspective, one of the most significant aspects of Iranian culture, poetry, is used by Aminikia to enrich his musical language. In his quartet *I Will Greet the Sun Again*, Aminikia uses one of the most iconic poems by Forough Farrokhzad to speak of hope and faith. In addition to his abstract approach towards using Iranian-style melisma, he adds narration to the music and provides an opportunity for the audience to become familiar with the sounds of the primary language of Iran, Farsi.

Another premise of this research is to address Iranian identity which goes beyond only using the musical elements of folk music. The sense of national identity and belonging is

perhaps the most important aspect of these folk-inspired compositions. Each composer presents an aspect of what ‘Persian identity’ means to them in their music. For Sahbai, creating “musical documentaries” and preserving traditional culture is his philosophy in presenting his Iranian identity. Vali has a similar philosophy creating melodies that stem from his long-lasting interest in collecting Persian folk songs. On the other hand, Paranj’s philosophy is to emphasize the improvisatory atmosphere and creation of *hal* that is present in Iranian music. The individualistic sound of the violin in *Avaz-e Jan* resembles the praised notion of spiritual seeker in Persian Sufism. On the other side of the spectrum, Darvishi’s *Reincarnation* highlights the important therapeutic role of music in ancient Iranian beliefs. His philosophy is to share his experience of traveling for thirty years to different regions of Iran in his music and be a part of the storytelling traditions of rural people. Aminikia’s philosophy is different, reflecting his unique experience in life of having to leave Iran at a young age because of his family’s Baha’i faith. His sense of identity and belonging encompasses a broader definition that goes beyond the borders of Iran. However, his music strongly conveys the colors and sounds of his home country, blended with faith and nostalgia.

The esthetic and compositional styles in these five pieces are rooted in Iran’s musical ethos, reflecting the traditions of the Iranian people and culture. For the knowledge of any violinist performing these works, understanding the history behind this music is crucial for interpreting these pieces. It also is important to realize the key role of ‘listening’ as the primary source of learning and performing in Iranian music. To better understand the bending of the pitch as well as the unique rhythmic structure of Iranian music, it is essential to feed the ears with this music prior to playing. Listening also helps the performer to come to terms with the cornerstone importance of improvisation within Iranian and nearly all Middle Eastern music.

It has been a privilege to work with these five composers and receive their guidance in performing their pieces. This project allowed me to deeply explore my role as a performer and take part in the creation of this music to a different extent. Each piece was an invitation for me to imagine my own story as well as to contribute to what the composers wanted to say. Undoubtedly, this is only a glimpse of what can be said about Iranian music and culture. I hope this project rouses more interest in exploring this enduring, living tradition.

“Everything that is made beautiful, fair, and lovely is made for the eye of one who sees it”

- Rumi

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